

The Battle for Discussion

A Look Back

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Deborah Lipstadt has recently become newsworthy again as a result of the release of the movie *Denial* that tells the tale of David Irving's defamation lawsuit against her and Penguin books. The movie, which flopped at the box office, purports to tell how David Irving charged Lipstadt with libel for calling him a "Holocaust denier" in her book *Denying the Holocaust*. There is little doubt who Hollywood intends to be the hero and who the villain in their version of the events.

The release of *Denial* provides an opportunity to reconsider the events leading up to Irving's libel lawsuit in 2000. To understand why Irving sought restitution in the courts, one must go back to 1993 and the release of Lipstadt's anti-revisionist screed, *Denying the Holocaust*. While hailed by the mainstream media,¹ *Denying the Holocaust* was actually a vicious and often inaccurate and misleading attack against those whom Lipstadt would tar with the label "deniers."

In a review that I wrote at the time I commented that Lipstadt's style was "reminiscent of the most vile Nazi rhetoric"² and indeed it was. Lipstadt wrote for example,

*In the 1930s Nazi rats spread a virulent form of antisemitism [sic] that resulted in the destruction of millions. Today the bacillus carried by these rats threatens to 'kill' those who already died at the hands of the Nazis for a second time by destroying the world's memory of them.*³

Such dehumanizing language should have sounded alarm bells for readers and reviewers alike. When a writer compares human beings to rodents in such terms, so the argument goes, the next step may be violation of that group's civil and human rights and perhaps even their extermination. The irony was lost however on the media hacks who piled praise on this awful book.

In the years that followed the book's release, writers, researchers, and activists were physically assaulted, arrested, incarcerated and fined for questioning the "official" story of the Second World War in general and the Holocaust in particular. To a great extent, the escalation of such persecution seems to have its origin with the widespread acceptance and general usage of the inaccurate and offensive term "Holocaust denier" which certainly enjoyed increased use following the release of *Denying the Holocaust*.

To better understand why someone might claim libel after being targeted with Lipstadt's label, one must define the terms in question.

"Deny" may be defined in part as "to declare not to be true." *Webster's Dictionary* includes the definition, "to refuse to accept as true or right; to reject as unfounded, unreal, etc." The *Encarta Dictionary for North America* identifies "denial" as a transitive verb that means "to withhold" or to "bar access to or use of" something to somebody.

Today however, the terms "deny" and "denial" are frequently super-charged with psychological meaning. From this perspective according to urbandictionary.com "denial consists of the refusal to accept a past or present reality." The *American Heritage Medical Dictionary* defines "denial" as "an unconscious defense mechanism characterized by refusal to acknowledge painful realities." Wikipedia

defines “denial” as “a defense mechanism postulated by Sigmund Freud, in which a person is faced with a fact that is too uncomfortable to accept and rejects it instead, insisting that it is not true despite what may be overwhelming evidence.”

For Deborah Lipstadt, the term “denial” has an even stronger and more sinister meaning. It does not simply mean, “to declare not to be true” nor is it a psychological defense mechanism. Lipstadt charges that “denial” involves camouflaging true goals. For Lipstadt “Holocaust deniers” are those who use the Holocaust story to advance some ideological or political agenda while hiding the fact that they are secretly fascists and anti-Semites.

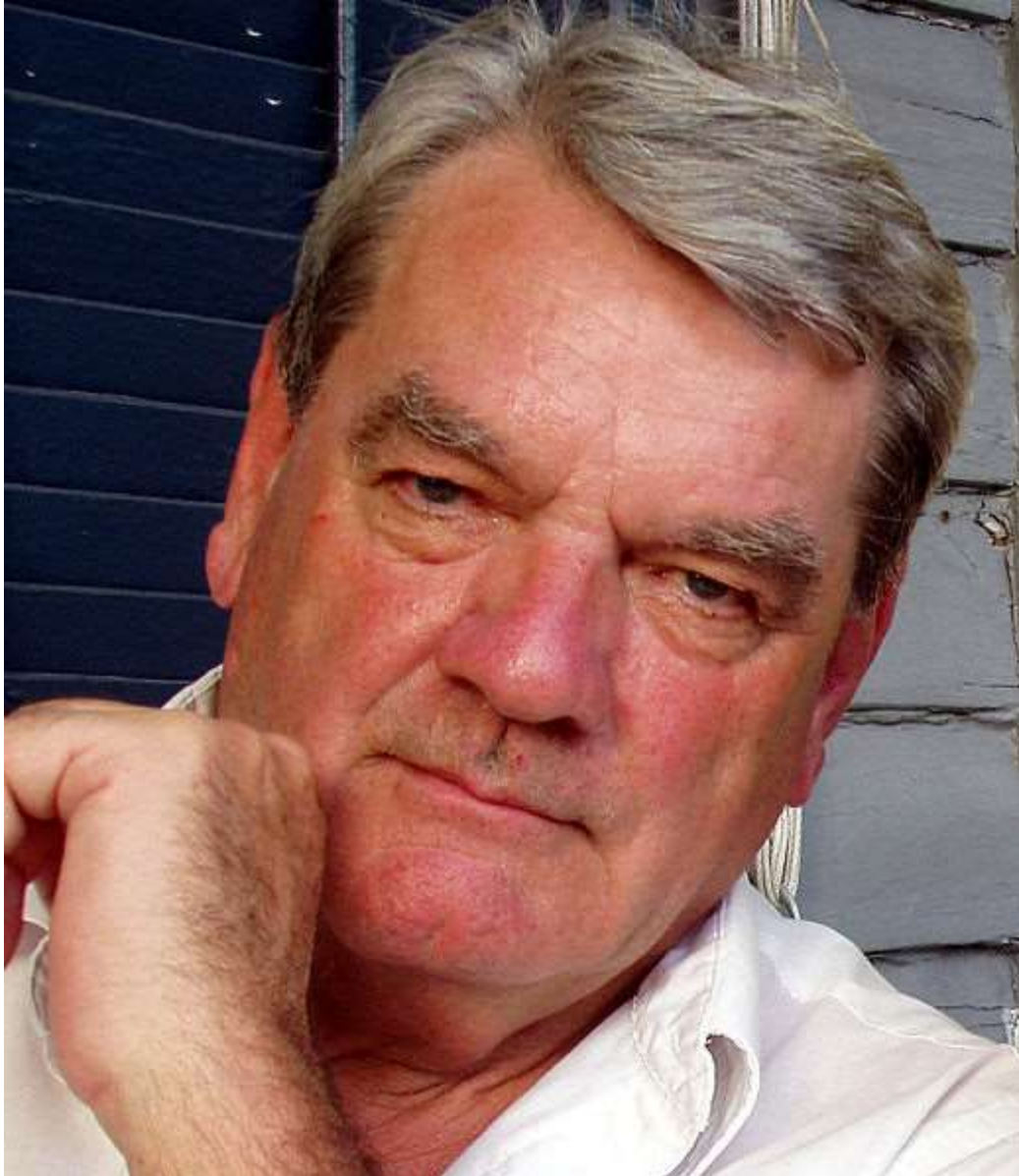
For Lipstadt, Holocaust deniers are “antisemites [sic] who have... managed, under the guise of scholarship, to camouflage their hateful ideology.”⁴ She wrote,

The attempt to deny the Holocaust enlists a basic strategy of distortion. Truth is mixed with absolute lies, confusing readers who are unfamiliar with the tactics of the deniers. Half-truths and story segments, which conveniently avoid critical information, leave the listener with a distorted impression of what really happened. ⁵

On many pages in *Denying the Holocaust* Lipstadt repeats her theme (as if repetition will prove its veracity):

- ...antisemitic [sic] ideology ... is what Holocaust denial is. (p. 1)
- ... deniers... shroud their true objectives. (p. 2)
- When I turned to the topic of Holocaust denial, I knew that I was dealing with extremist antisemites [sic] who have increasingly managed, under the guise of scholarship, to camouflage their hateful ideology. (p. 3)
- ...intimately connected to a neofascist political agenda. (p. 3)
- ... camouflage their goals. (p. 4)
- ...deniers' objective of delegitimizing Israel. (p. 14)
- ...most had no trouble identifying Holocaust denial as disingenuous. (p. 18)
- ...[Holocaust denial] is undeniably a form of antisemitism. [sic] (p. 20)
- Some have a distinct political objective: If there was no Holocaust, what is so wrong with national socialism? For many falsifiers this, not antisemitism, [sic] is their primary agenda. (p. 23)
- ..the deniers' contentions are a composite of claims founded on racism, extremism, and virulent antisemitism [sic]. (p. 26)

For Lipstadt, “deniers” are not those who express doubts about some element of the Holocaust story, but those who actually believe the orthodox story in all its gruesome details! The “deniers” according to Lipstadt purposefully distort materials and even “lie” in order to support their ideology. Lipstadt defined that ideology in varying terms but the net result was always the same, “they are fascists and antisemites [sic].”⁶



British historian, David Irving. Photo taken July 2003.

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That Lipstadt named best-selling British historian David Irving in her screed and called him “one of the most dangerous spokespersons for Holocaust denial” was a charge that would need to be backed up, especially since David Irving had never written a book on the subject of the Holocaust and unlike many of Lipstadt’s other targets, Irving was neither dead nor without the means to launch a counter-attack.

In addition, during the years following Lipstadt’s attack, Irving’s good fortune took a serious turn. Throughout the ‘70s and ‘80s Irving’s best-selling books on various aspects of the Second World War could be found easily in any mall bookstore. By 1996, this suddenly changed. St. Martin’s Press had contracted to publish Irving’s forthcoming biography of Hitler’s propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels. This volume would likely sell well as had Irving’s earlier biographies of Hermann Göring, Adolf Hitler, Erwin Rommel, and others. As news of the pending release got out, St. Martin’s Press was

inundated with hate mail. Complaints and pressure increased - including even death threats. Finally, Thomas McCormack, chief executive officer of St. Martins, gave in and reversed the company's earlier declared intention of resisting the onslaught.⁷ St. Martin's canceled its contract to publish Irving's volume. Facing the harsh reality of cancelled book deals and a growing vocal minority that sought to silence him, Irving sought restitution.

There was little doubt in revisionist circles in the late '90s that Lipstadt's assertion that David Irving was a "denier" could be shown to be injurious in terms of book sales, contracts and otherwise. The defense would need to demonstrate that Lipstadt had appropriately applied her term. As such, the defense would be in the unenviable position of having to prove that Irving did not actually believe his own writings and interpretation of history.

It seemed to revisionists at the time that any attempt on the part of the defense to prove a systematic extermination of Europe's Jews would be irrelevant. Should the court happen to accept the orthodox Holocaust story, this would not in and of itself support the contention that Irving (or for that matter any other Holocaust revisionist) had disingenuous motives. It would be up to the defense to prove that that Irving had knowingly misrepresented facts or lied about matters related to the Holocaust in order to spread anti-Semitism or to otherwise bolster fascism. Without proving that Irving's motives were disingenuous, the defense would lose their case. Or so it seemed.

The contrast between Irving and Lipstadt throughout the trial could not have been more stark. Irving served as his own attorney and spoke at length about a plethora of subjects. His closing speech alone runs to 39 pages.⁸ Lipstadt did not speak during the trial. She never took the stand. While many argued that she feared being decimated on the details and facts of the Holocaust by Irving, her behavior should not have been a surprise.

From her entry into the spotlight of the Holocaust controversy with the publication of her *Denying the Holocaust*, she refused to debate or discuss with those she branded "deniers." In the preface to her book she commented:

*Since the book's appearance I have received numerous invitations to appear on television talk shows aired nationally in the United States. Whenever the plans include inviting a denier I categorically decline to appear.*⁹

Lipstadt claims to support open discussion, "The intellectual process is rooted in the constant reevaluation of previous findings based on new information."¹⁰ She notes however that she is not open to "debating the very fact of the Holocaust."¹¹ Without defining her terms, where discussion is acceptable to her and where not is seemingly unclear. It is critical to understand that Lipstadt's book was never meant to stimulate discussion of Holocaust revisionism. In fact, it was meant to shut it down. The language used throughout is a "moral" language; a language of "good" and "evil." By accusing the revisionists of anti-Semitism and fascism, Lipstadt painted an entire group of people and their writings as evil. This tactic was meant to shut down any consideration of the arguments of revisionists and essentially to paint them (in 2016 terms) as "deplorable."

Lipstadt wrote, "we will debate much about it but not whether it happened."¹² For Lipstadt "it" cannot and should not be discussed. But history is about inquiry. In fact the word, derived from the Greek *historia* means "inquiry, knowledge acquired by investigation." David Irving never wrote or

claimed “the Holocaust did not happen.” In several articles and books Irving comments on the millions of Jews who perished and has even accepted that certain concentration camps utilized gas chambers to carry out mass exterminations.

At some point, it must have dawned on the defense that the trial itself could be used to shut down David Irving. Not only would the tag “Holocaust denier” be a shameful scarlet letter, but also the legal requirement that should he lose that he be responsible to pay the entire cost for the defense would potentially bankrupt him. Court and defense costs would amount to approximately \$13 million.

In the end the Court ruled against Irving. The media would forever sully his name with “Holocaust denier” when reporting news about him. The label, now made “official,” would *deny* him access to major publishing houses. Who in the wake of the St. Martin’s debacle and the Lipstadt trial would work with a man such as this?

Today one may wonder if Irving’s lawsuit was a good strategy. It is of course easy to second guess with clear hindsight. It is important however to remember the context of the lawsuit. Following Lipstadt’s book, intellectual freedom with regard to the Holocaust was being shut down all around the world. In 1996 a German judge had ordered that Germar Rudolf be arrested for publishing a ground-breaking revisionist analysis of various aspects of the Holocaust, *Grundlagen zur Zeitgeschichte*. Later that year, a judge ordered that all copies of the book be burned. Also that same year, Tony Blair during his candidacy for prime minister of Great Britain repeatedly promised to ban revisionist writings about the Holocaust.¹³ It was in this environment of declining freedom of expression and out-and-out persecution of revisionists that David Irving launched his lawsuit. His objective, as he stated in the closing speech of the trial was simple:

*This trial is about my reputation as a human being, as an historian of integrity, and ... as a father. [...] A judgment in my favor does not mean that the Holocaust never happened; it means only that in England today discussion is still permitted.*¹⁴

At the time, no one else had the means to challenge the clampdown on intellectual freedom. No one else had even the remotest chance to counter the growing forces of censorship. As the trial proceeded it appeared as a boxing match, not over the Holocaust itself, but over whether dissenting viewpoints on this one tragic time in history could be spoken or even considered. In one corner we had Deborah Lipstadt and all the power of the mainstream seeking to *deny* discussion of historical events that had been elevated to mythical and nearly religious proportions. In the other corner was a lone historian, a champion for freedom fighting for the permission for whole generations present and future to discuss the Holocaust in the years ahead.

It is no surprise that Irving was cast as the villain in *Denial*. It should also be of little surprise that audiences shunned a film in which all of the powers of an empire squelched a lone rebel. In these days however of Brexit and the Trump presidency, I can only wonder whether, had Hollywood altered the screenplay (so to speak, “flipped the script”), what the reception might have been. Had Irving been portrayed as a champion of free speech fighting for his honor in a time of increasing political correctness and censorship of dissident perspectives, they just might have had a surprise box-office sensation.

Notes:

- 1 *The New York Times Book Review* called *Denying the Holocaust* an “important and impassioned work.” This is just one of many such examples.
- 2 Richard Widmann, “Denying the Revisionists: The Errors and Falsifications of Deborah Lipstadt,” *The Revisionist*, No. 5, Summer 2000.
Online: <https://codoh.com/library/document/384/>
- 3 Deborah Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (New York: Plume, 1994) (hereafter referred to as *Denying*), p. xvii.
- 4 Ibid., p. 3.
- 5 Ibid., p. 2.
- 6 Ibid., p. 4.
- 7 "St. Martin's Cancels Book on Goebbels," *The New York Times*, April 5, 1996, p. D4.
- 8 David Irving, *Closing Speech against Penguin Books Ltd and Deborah Lipstadt*, (Focal Point Publications, 2000).
Online: http://www.fpp.co.uk/trial/closing/Lipstadt_closing.pdf
- 9 Lipstadt, Op Cit., p. xiii.
- 10 Ibid., p. xiv.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid..
- 13 Samuel Crowell, *The Gas Chamber of Sherlock Holmes*, (Charleston, W. Va.: Nine-Banded Books, 2011), p.6
- 14 David Irving, Op. Cit. p.3.

Author(s) :	Richard A. Widmann
Title:	The Battle for Discussion
Sources:	<i>Inconvenient History</i> , 8(4) 2016
Dates:	published: 2016-11-28, first posted: 2016-11-30 15:24:24

<http://inconvenienthistory.com/8/4/4176>